DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 039 567 CG 005 355

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TITLE Sex Education for Parents.
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PUB DATE 23 Mar 70
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 23-26, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80
DESCRIPTORS Education, *Educational Responsibility, Family Role, Parent Attitudes, *Parent Education, *Parent Reaction, *Parent School Relationship, *Sex Education, Social Change

ABSTRACT

The family is no longer an effective transmitter of many important kinds of knowledge. As a result, many of the family's traditional functions have been taken over by other social agencies. From this perspective it seems certain that comprehensive sex education programs will soon become a reality in our schools. It is imperative that a positive approach be taken toward the outrage and protests of many concerned parents. There is a need for greater awareness of and sensitivity to the sources of this concern. The following three procedures could be beneficial in calming the fears of parents: (1) programs and courses on sex education for parents should be implemented. Such courses would help the adult understand his own sexuality; (2) there should be close parental involvement in the establishment and content of the sex education courses; and (3) means should be provided for wide dissemination of information about resources and materials on sex education. (Author/RSM)

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SEX EDUCATION FOR PARENTS

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A paper read at the meetings of the American Personnel and Guidance Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 23, 1970.

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In a recent very cogent article Robert S. Morison (1967) discussed, as he put it, "the present-day assault on the integrity and authority of the family." He identified three areas as the focal points for this attack: (1) The increasing inadequacy of the family as a transmitter of knowledge; (2) the weakening of the prestige of the family as the basic unit for human reproduction; and (3) the impending invasion of the home for purposes of early intervention in child care as knowlege is increasingly accumulated on the plasticity of the human nervous system in earliest life. According to Morison's argument, as public recognition and support of formal education continues to rise, the prestige and influence of the family will continue to decline. One might wish to take issue with Morison's thesis on the deteriorating status of the family, but I think the current controversy over sex education in the schools is symptomatic of this trend and gives support to what he is saying.

It does seem to be the case that the family is becoming increasingly inadequate as a transmitter of knowledge to successive generations of offspring. Young boys and girls no longer seem to be looking to their parents for basic information, for sources of knowledge. Their fundamental expectation, though perhaps not a conscious one, is that they will learn about the world and how to get along in it from persons and places

other than parents and the home. An interesting endeavor might be to ask a group of children and adolescents where they expect to learn about the basic things they will need to know in order to be happy and well-functioning adults. It is my hypothesis that parents would be mentioned infrequently and rather low in importance in this respect. As McLuhan is wont to point out, the level of information inside the family circle is much lower than that outside.

One aspect of this rapidly changing world of especially great interest to me is the status of what might be called moral wisdom. In earlier, perhaps less turbulent times the repositories of wisdom, knowledge, and morals were inextricably intertwined. The high priests of early societies were the philosophers, the astronomers, the lawyers, and the theologians, all wrapped into one. To a rather considerable extent, scientific and theological knowledge were juxtaposed. The incredibly rapid growth of scientific knowledge in recent times has resulted in an increasingly yawning gulf between natural and theological knowledge and a considerable decline of interest in the latter. Standards of ethics and morals occupy a rather uneasy position somewhere in between.

The family's role formerly included the transmission of both knowledge and standards for moral conduct. Today parents and priests are no longer seen as repositories of basic knowledge; children seem to understand this and seek learning elsewhere.

On the other hand, despite some superficial indications to the contrary, our views on ethics and morality have changed relatively little since Biblical times. Father, mother, and religious leaders are still generally recognized as the mainstays in transmitting standards of morality and ethics, if not theological knowledge.

If what I have outlined even approximates the truth, one could then rather stringently criticize the family for the kind of job it is doing in one of the few functions it has retained. In providing a set of moral and ethical standards, parents have also effectively instilled manifold sexual inhibitions in the developing person. These inhibitions, of course, have been the source for any number of impossibly contradictory attitudes and behaviors, and what is worse, crippling emotional disorders. The man or woman who learned during childhood and adolescence that it was "wrong" to examine one's own genitals, that it was even "worse" to have any contact with those of another person, and that any attempts at heterosexual relations were morally dissolute, is expected to reverse completely these attitudes on one's wedding night. If the initial lessons were well learned, the unlearning is certain to be difficult and may never take place. Sex education among monkeys, as Harlow has shown, is accepted as a part of general preparation for living which includes how to avoid foes and where to find food. It seems that only man has managed to become so entangled among his own taboos that he has come to regard the practical sex education of his young as immoral. Parents and society have given the American adolescent the idea that sex in general is vaguely wrong and is therefore to be avoided, but that nevertheless everyone does it. Furthermore, the peculiar social customs which have evolved in this country provide the adolescent with almost unlimited freedom with which to explore sex. As a result of these strange conditions mistakes sometimes happen, and parents evince the predictable surprise and wonder what went wrong and why it happened to them.

This critique of our parents' job of rearing and socializing their children, particularly with regard to sex, could be extended to great length. A more useful activity, it seems to me, would be to try to arrive at some understanding of why this particular state of affairs exists and what can be done about it, assuming that the conditions are problematic.

It would seem that Morison is right in his contention that the family is no longer an effective transmitter of many important kinds of knowledge. Several recent studies have shown that even a majority of well-educated parents never really get around to meaningful discussion of sex with their children. Many reasons are provided, including (1) they don't know how, (2) they feel uncomfortable talking about such things with their children, and (3) they postpone it too long, so the kids learn it elsewhere. The point of all this is not to advocate that the family be abolished; rather, it is to merely point out that some of the family's traditional functions have been taken over by other social agencies and that the family is doing an inadequate job on some of those it still retains.

It appears certain, from this perspective, that comprehensive sex education programs in our schools are only a few years away from being a reality. It is recognized, of course, that such programs exist in some schools now. The idea of such an addition to the curriculum will be accepted as an ordinary component, just as algebra, biology, and physical education are now. I think the best interpretation of the present turmoil over sex education is that it represents the last shudders of the family system before it yields yet another one of its historical, deeply ingrained

functions. This phenomenon of relinquishing traditional responsibilities has been one of the disquieting aspects of our increasingly urbanized, technologized society. The parental duty to instruct offspring in matters of sexual processes and conduct appears to be the current victim of this trend. And it is probable that more familial functions will succumb in the future.

What will be the effects of this parental erosion on the people involved? For the child, it is possible to expect that they might be quite beneficial, at least in certain respects. For the parents, however, it is less easy to be certain. One of the main fears, and certainly an understandable one, of those who would keep society and the State out of the home is that too much outside control of growth and development will reduce the freedom of the individual and perhaps eventuate in a bland, conformist society. I have few worries on this score. As Robert Morison has aptly observed, education has never turned out the exact product educators had in mind, and I am reasonably confident they never will. I believe, with Erik Erikson, in the human organism's innate capacity to grow and develop in positive, salutary directions. It seems certain that the most educated people are those who are least conformist and most innovative.

Certain other functions of the family -- notably the provision and maintenance of a reasonably stable emotional atmosphere, with some more or less regularly available parental figure for the child to cling to in times of distress -- are likely to be most effectively and economically provided, for some time to come, by parents as we have traditionally known them. Presumably some inventiveness will be needed to preserve and, if

possible, enhance these particular roles while the inevitable decline of familial function occurs in other areas.

Of course, those who see the need for sex education in the schools must deal with the immediate problems. And the most immediate of problems, with the possible exception of finding individuals with sufficient qualifications and the emotional stability to teach these courses, is dealing with the many concerned parents who are clamorously expressing their shock, outrage, dismay, or whatever, at the very idea of teaching sex in school. It is easy enough for those persons of liberated thought to dismiss these objecting parents as victims of right-wing shibboleths and Jurassic mentalities. Of course, not only is such an attitude about the anti-sex education people inaccurate and unfair, it is also distinctly harmful. As Montaigne once said, "The conviction of wisdom is the plague of men."

The sex education issue is not a simple one; it is not a matter of simply adding one more course to the existing curriculum. The proponents of sex education must deal with the realities, and the realities are that sex has been and is central to the identity of the individual, and because of the peculiar sort of social evolution that has taken place in the Western world, sexual matters are emotionally charged and typically anxiety arousing. In order to be able to institute sound programs of instruction on sex and emotional maturity, advocates must deal with this fact.

It is imperative that a positive approach be taken toward the protests of the concerned parents. There is a need for a greater awareness of and sensitivity to the sources of this concern. I think the basic

position of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) cannot be emphasized too much:

> We affirm the right and the obligation of parents to educate their own children as to the so-called "facts of life" and, more especially, as to the meaning and significance of these facts in their lives (Broderick, 1969).

I take this to mean that sex education programs must respect the sexual and moral values of the home from which the child comes. This implies that instruction in sex and values and morals, as in all other kinds of instruction, is not to exist independently of the home. It may be true that the family has lost many of its former responsibilities, but this does not mean that parents are no longer influential or that their opinions no longer count.

The school is being forced to assume functions -- ranging from guarding the child's mental and dental health, to making sure he knows how to type and swim, to training for basic skills necessary for many vocations, to providing sex education, and so on -- that formerly belonged to the family, the neighborhood, and the family's spiritual and medical advisors. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the child's parents retain the primary responsibility and privilege of raising him, and the more this function is turned over to an outside agency, the more the parents' enjoyment and sense of competence is diminished. Another issue is that this multiplicity of functions dissipates the school's energies and further contributes to the formation of a complex, rigidified bureaucracy. While it is true that the school must educate the whole child -- no matter how hard it might try, it could not do anything else -- it should not have to assume the whole education of the whole child

on a full-time basis. This is the joint realm of parents and schools.

Sex education in a formal setting, the schools of the nation, represents a formidable challenge for communities of the Western world. As the citizens of our towns and cities emerge from the shadows of guilt, they are seeking uncertainly for guideposts through the fog that still remains. We go about the business of education ambivalently, teaching well the safe subjects with obvious practical applications, but in areas of controversy we deal out banalities and platitudes, if anything at all. Parents assuredly contribute to this educational ambivalence, and ultimately they are the victims of it.

Only the foolhardy could claim that they have immediate remedies for these problems, but allow me to discuss briefly three procedures pertaining to sex education which give promise of being beneficial in calming the fears of parents.

First of all, programs and courses on sex education <u>for parents</u> appear to yield satisfying results for those parents willing to attend. Usually these programs are offered in the evenings, about one meeting per week. Their content varies from program to program, but one major point of emphasis is evident in most courses. Primarily these courses attempt to help the adult understand his own sexuality. This aspect is perhaps the keystone to general community acceptance of a sex education program, for once a parent develops an understanding of his own sexual nature, the need for a sex education curriculum of some sorts is easy to comprehend and accept. Quite early children become aware of parental ambivalence about sex and of the ambiguity of taboos, including adult violations of taboos. Adult hypocricy becomes plainly evident to those of the middle

years of childhood. The parents themselves, who grew up under even more restrictive conditions, can be pardoned if they feel that sex is a highly sensitive topic about which it is hard to talk to their children. In fact, recent surveys of adolescents and their parents suggest that the generation gap is most conspicious with regard to matters of sex: Each group feels it can comfortably talk to the other on most all issues except those relating to sex. Yet nearly all parents feel that they want their children to know the facts of sex, to understand them, and to grow up to enjoy sex wisely and thoroughly. It seems that their major problem is to know for themselves what the morally and psychologically relevant standards are for the conduct of adult sexuality. This is something they have to resolve for themselves, since the culture today provides answers ranging from total sexual license, whereby it would be in bad taste and selfish to refuse just about any prospective partner, to a harsh puritanism which says that sex should be enjoyed minimally if at all, and then only in the narrow context of maintenance of the species, and disturbing one's nightclothes as little as possible in the process.

Parents, of course, teach their children all sorts of very important things in a very informal manner: attitudes about man-woman relationships (loving-hostile, dominant-passive, trusting-suspicious, satisfying-unsatisfying), attitudes about sex itself, styles of modesty and openness, what can be discussed, what is unthinkable, what is intimate. When parents become fully cognizant of what they teach their children, whether wittingly or otherwise, they become more fully accepting of aid in the manner of formal instruction in the school in addition to their own informal teaching at home. The problem is to convey to parents the

notion of personal knowledge, a phrase coined by the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1958), which is the idea that knowledge, whether about sex or anything else, is not something external to oneself but something to be absorbed and incorporated into one's own world view. The child's educational opportunities are not confined to either the domain of the school or the home, but they belong to both and to the entire life-space of the child.

The second recommendation is that there should be close parental involvement in the establishment and the conduct of the sex education curriculum. The position of SIECUS is quite clear on this point: "We affirm the right of a parent to be informed as to the curricula, concepts and teaching materials used in the sex instruction of children" (Broderick, 1969). The educational establishment has the obligation to encourage parents to review all instructional materials and to discuss them with the educators. It is recognized also that the parent has the equal obligation of respecting the professionalism of the educator. Not only is such a procedure the only responsible way to proceed, it is also sound from a tactical perspective. Many schools have developed programs using close involvement of the community, and these programs invariably win the overwhelming support of parents and students alike.

The third suggestion is to provide means for wide dissemination of information about resources and materials on sex education. Information is a powerful force, and the more widely it is available, the more influential it becomes. Materials describing where information can be obtained about sex in general and sex education in particular should

be readily available to parents and youth alike. Likely distribution points might be the public library, the school, the churches, and the check-out counter in the supermarket. Parents often express the need for information about how to talk to their children about sex, and older children and adolescents frequently could make use of factual, printed materials on all sorts of topics related to sex, sexuality, the individual, and the life processes. These readily available materials can be tremendously important supplements to the instruction provided by parents and the schools. Every indication suggests that positive effects result from the exposure to accurate information, honestly presented, about sex and sex education.

I suggested before that the sex education issue is not a simple one. As we move into the implementation of formal instructional programs on matters related to sex, we must recognize the consequences of our actions. It is becoming increasingly apparent that it is no longer sufficient to assess our behavior in terms of its results on those immediately around us. We must consider the children involved, of course, but also we must expand our responsibility to their parents and to the larger society. We must consider the effects of our programs on them and deal with them in a responsible manner. The expansion of the educational system has developed in conjunction with the advance of scientific knowledge, and all too frequently formal education has created new misdemeanors if it has not caused new sins. With responsible forethought this should not happen with its expansion into programs of sex education.

The anxiety of our time is forcing us to mobilize all possible aids to help parents perceive the needs of societies at large and to

identify themselves with them. Not only have social and economic developments of recent centuries made everyone far more dependent on everyone else for means of subsistence, but also the responsibility for the development of the individual personality is shifting from the family to the society at large, as I have tried to demonstrate in this talk. A new educational role is to aid individuals, parents especially, in seeking emotional security and a sense of significance in roles which greatly transcend the limits of the family or the village. Because of the nature of the biological and social evolution the human species has undergone, one aspect of the human dilemma is that we experience life as individuals while in the long run we survive as members of a society. What is crucial is that society must recognize what is happening and must become more aware of the need to develop a new mechanism for supplying rewards and satisfactions to the individual, and for reinforcing the ties between human beings, which formerly were provided almost wholly through family life.

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